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ABSTRACT

Noting that humans are educated more by than about the mass media, this paper argues that modern society has produced an informal (mediated) ethics curriculum which may be more powerful than the formal (institutionally educational) curriculum developed by academics and administrators. It first examines the informal curriculum, listing statistics on children's exposure to the mass media; noting that children remember advertising slogans from childhood television shows better than memorized facts from school; and describing inaccurate views of the world the media instill in young people. The second section focuses on the formal curriculum, stressing the lack of high school and grade school instruction about the mass media--even courses on journalism are technically rather than ethically oriented. University level efforts at ethics instruction are covered in the third section, recognizing both the encouraging increase in ethics and mass communication courses and the discouraging lack of graduate studies in these fields. Counterbalancing guidelines--that parents must stress the unreal nature of television programs and advertisements and that advertisers and the government must take their responsibility for the informal curriculum seriously--are introduced in the fourth section. The fifth section presents qualitative guidelines for the formal curriculum, aiming for understanding of self, other cultures, other professions, and all periods of history. A concluding section reiterates the value of ethics--it enables humans to think, know, express, and act. (SKC)

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Communication and Ethics: The Informal and Formal Curricula

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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☐ *The informal curriculum of environment educates the human being far more about ethics and values than does the formal education curriculum. The ratio between the informal (ethical education by media) and formal (education about media ethics) has become absurd. A number of absurd ratios reveal hidden values taught by mass communication.*

Humans are incessantly "educated." In some instances education is *intentional*, as in institutions of learning, and in other instances education is *un*intentional, as in typical learning about commercial products through advertising.

This paper demonstrates that modern society has produced an *informal* (mediated) curriculum which may be far more powerful than the *formal* (institutionally educational) curriculum developed by academics and administrators. In addition, it shows that the ethical problems inherent in a powerful informal curriculum are poorly and insufficiently studied in the formal curriculum.

In short, most humans may be educated more *by* than *about* the media. The ethical socialization mass media bring may not be properly counterbalanced by instruction which 1) informs humans about media indoctrination, and 2) teaches students to identify ethical values inherent in media programming, in media practices, in their own behavior, and in behavior which they think would bring a healthy society. The state of formal media ethics instruction will be inspected, and proposals to solve its concomitant problems will be offered.

The Informal Curriculum

It is estimated that the average preschool child sees approximately 5,000 television ads a year. (Heibert, 1982, p. 550)

Between the ages of 6 and 18, U.S. children will watch about 16,000 hours of television and spend another 4,000 hours with radio, records, and movies. (Williams, 1983, p. 15)

Over 10 million children watch television every evening between 9 p.m. and midnight. (Heibert, 1982, p. 550)

The average (American) household has 5.7 (radio) sets. (*Radio Facts, 1981*)

The television viewer is bombarded with 30,000 to 40,000 television ads per year. (Wilhams, 1983, p. 15)

In the past 80 years, more new forms of communication have devel-

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oped than throughout the almost 360 centuries which separate us from the first *homo sapiens*. (Williams, 1983, p. 24)

A child born today could graduate from high school four years after the magical year 2001 selected by Arthur Clarke for his novel, and adapted by Stanley Kubrick for his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. According to the figures above, such a teenager would apply for college after an exorbitant mass media informal curriculum experience. From 1987 until 2004 he/she would consume more than:

350,000 television commercials

19,000 hours of television viewing

5,000 hours of records, tapes, radio, and movies

7 household media machines

More new *types* of communication technologies than all his/her ancestors combined

0 hours formal study of the mass media and their environments

So pervasive and invasive is "the informal curriculum" of mass media that today's child may mindlessly ask "Where's the beef?" or think "It's Miller time" long before learning the word "ethics" or its meaning. Most college students shown ads popular in their pre-school years remember a five to ten word jingle better than they recall one word national capitols learned in grade school geography, or four figure dates deliberately memorized in junior high school history.

Greece's extraordinary ethicist, Plato, warned his audience that they might come to substitute mediated abstraction (writing) for actual experience. Now, human memory seems caught in a web of media entrapment which persistently colors the perceiver and the perceived. Words such as "Watergate," "Westmoreland,"and "Pentagon Papers" summon from most of us pivotal moments in media ethics which we experience only in mediated memory. These powerful media fill the human subconscious more substantially than isolated college courses organize consciousness. In his famous *Secret Life of an Unborn Child*, Dr. Thomas Verny (1981) implies that even the embryo is influenced by the mother's mediated environment.

The informal curriculum is both the context and the content for applied ethics. It is a curriculum of soap operas, top 40 hits, billboards, and background jingles. From such a subterranean education, the human being builds an ethical framework subconsciously stored but not consciously formulated.

The student of the informal curriculum believes in an unusual world. The combined insights and research of leading media thinkers such as McLuhan, Gerbner, Williams, and many others[1], suggest that the modern electronic "student":

1) thinks that older people are less open-minded, bright, and effective at jobs than younger people;

2) is more afraid of potential urban violence;

3) becomes more accepting of violence;

4) buys new and insufficiently tested products based on advertising appeal;

5) associates real minorities and other groups with mediated caricatures;

6) lets male and female role-playing rules be influenced by strong-identification with celebrities; and,

7) thinks distrust is an appropriate attitude toward strangers.

Moreover, the informal curriculum may have a direct correlation with the formal one. A recent study by Mark Felter (1984, pp. 104-118) of over 10,000 sixth graders in California noted that "students who viewed more than six hours of television per day had sharply lower achievement scores in all three content areas."

Ultimately, the media atmosphere surrounding us influences the way in which a sentence is read and interpreted. As Harold Innis (1952) insisted, each new communication technology has profound implications for the character of knowledge transmit-

ted. The informal curriculum is ubiquitous and can become, if not unchecked, omnipotent. Even the word "ethics" itself may be trivialized to a standard textbook or television meaning. Consequently, an understanding and transformation of the existing formal curriculum in communication ethics is invaluable.

The Formal Curriculum

If Plato was correct that child-rearing is the most important task of society, an important ethical question becomes "are children being educated about mass media or by them?" Communication and education expert Dr. Donald Boileau, Director of Educational Services and Research, Speech Communications Association (1984), says probably less than 1% of U.S. high school curricula relates to mass communication ethics. That national high school and grade school curriculum statistics do not even mention the topic "communication ethics," or synonymous topics, is itself revealing. While it is possible that, in some states, up to 2-3% of high school curricula deal with mass communication, in all likelihood far less than one-tenth of courses deal with ethical questions, and those treat primarily ethical topics relative to freedom of speech.

The data of the National Center for Education statistics (USDOE, 1984) are deceptively encouraging. Over the nine year period between 1973 and 1982, the number of high schools teaching "journalism/school publications" rose by almost 50%, the number teaching "radio/TV and film" increased by over 370%, and the number teaching "communication theory/speech/diction" mushroomed by over 1,300%. Problematically, despite the upsurge of educational offerings (which correspond to the dramatic increase in mass communication careers), the majority of such courses aim more toward technical rather than perceptual training—training that could be offered in more specialized schools and programs. Other courses teach communication as a total abstraction (models such as Shannon-Weaver, or Schramm) without considering hidden ethical underpinnings or the responsibilities of communicators.

It is safe to estimate that fewer than one in twenty high school students are led to think provocatively about their personal and social relationship with mass media (USDOE, 1983). Undoubtedly far fewer than one in one hundred discuss communication and ethics in a formal, systematic manner. Perhaps the greatest need for media understanding occurs at the grade school, kindergarten, day care, and nursery school levels. Adopting even the most conservative estimates that pre-school children see 5,000 television ads per year, the educator is challenged by the deeply inculcated values, knowledge, and ethics already taught to toddlers by the informal curriculum. If ethics means, in one sense, a code of right and wrong behavior, the informal curriculum quickly transmits a code of ethics associating forms of materialism, consumerism, hedonism, and romanticism with "right" to the American child. If, on the other hand, ethics means the inquiry about rules of conduct, the informal curriculum teaches the opposite of inquiry into a wide range of either ideal or real options. It teaches imitation of a narrow range of commercial conventions.

The Academy

At the university level the efforts of Clifford Christians, Jay Black, Lou Hodges, Sissela Bok, John Merrill, Ralph Barney, William Rivers, Robert Schmuhl, Deni Elliott, Ed Lambeth, Eric Elbot, J.M. Kittross, Dave Gordon, Jim Jackson, Gene Goodwin, Art Kaul, and many others are laudable. Moreover, a Renaissance of university-industry cooperation is broadening investigation of the field: "...the Speech Communication Association recently made ethics its entire convention theme. The Gannett, Poynter, and Markle Foundations and the American Society of Newspaper Editors are funding research and teaching in ethics. Three

new books have emerged on the subject in the past year, another eight or nine are in process..."(Christians, 1985). Moreover, Christians' work, now more than two years old, seems to predict an even larger wave of interest.

Within higher education, the growth rate of students studying a) mass communication and b) ethics is also impressive. As late as World War I, communication degrees were not common in serious mainstream curricula. By 1981, the Department of Education recorded the awarding of 31,282 bachelor's degrees, 3,105 master's degrees and 182 doctorates (Kirkgasler, 1984). Kittross suggests that the number of bachelor's degrees alone could conceivably double by 1990 (Kittross, 1983). Such a growth rate implies that formal education may be striving to catch up with an accelerating cultural shift and corresponding career ratio transition.

However, before considering that such growth is, in ethical terms, correct, or good, or useful, a closer examination is required. For example, during the 1970s the number of first professional degrees in medicine increased by 173%, in law by 209%, and in communication by 290% (USDOE, 1984). In other words, in one decade the number of qualified doctors almost doubled, the number of lawyers more than doubled, and the number of communicators almost tripled. However, on closer examination, an unfair comparison is discovered: The first professional law degrees are LL.B. or J.D. degrees, but the first professional communication degrees are B.A. and B.S. degrees. In 1981, when 182 communication doctorates were awarded, 15,505 comparable medical degrees and 36,331 legal degrees were awarded. Hence, beneath the surface an absurd ratio persists. The absurd ratio refers to the ratio of formal curricula to human involvement in a critical activity.

A more dangerous corollary to the comparative professional degree ratio helps explain the absurd ratio observation: Those who consider what substances (drugs, bacteria) ought to enter our bodies have many years of specific post-collegiate training; those who assess what behavior (murder, rape) ought legitimately enter the social body are specifically, intensively, and formally trained at the graduate level; those who formulate, however, the substances which enter the mind and heart of society via the eyes and ears of culture have relatively and remarkably minuscule formal understanding. While a few graduate schools of journalism are the exception to the rule, many mass communication programs compress liberal arts or science and academic training into a stunted undergraduate appetizer.

While the breadth of undergraduate offerings in mass communication media ethics far outdistance comparable graduate, secondary, primary, and pre-school offerings, the present undergraduate curriculum raises both questions and needs. On the one hand, general mass communication undergraduate growth has fared well (compared to General English, for example [General Mass Communication = +345% B.A.'s in 1980-82; General English = -2% B.A.'s in same period])(USDOE,1982b). On the other, Paul Peterson's statistics (Peterson, 1984; Peterson, 1986) suggest growth is neither explosive nor consistent. For example, "journalism and mass communication enrollment in 1983 was apparently unchanged from 1982." The no-growth experience continued until 1986, which has shown a 5 percent increase.

Whatever the increase in overall undergraduate formal curriculum, Christians' surveys (Christians, 1985) indicate that only "4,000 students per year actually take a media ethics course presently out of the 92,111 total enrollment reported by Peterson (Peterson, 1984) in *Journalism Educator*." Hence, approximately 5% of estimated communications majors studied ethics formally in 1984. Fewer than

half of all mass communication and journalism programs offered specific courses in communication or journalism ethics in 1986.

In counterpoint, the growth rate of ethics-related courses is significant, with 59 new ethics courses being offered in communication programs from 1977 to 1984, compared to only 10 such courses in the 1969 to 1977 period (Christians, 1985). Communication ethics may be discussed as a "boom field," but unless such courses are substantial, they may contribute only to an illusion of growth.

Teaching Ethics in Journalism Education by Christians and Catherine Covert (1980) interprets the findings of an earlier survey (1977) of ethics instruction in journalism and mass communication programs. While the data produced a wealth of information about pedagogical approaches, texts, and value systems employed, it pointed to the weakness inherent in such variety:

Media ethics are in a very rudimentary, unsophisticated form at present. There is little agreement vis-a-vis the place of ethical codes, what a normative view entails, and what value system to employ (Christians, 1978).

Current inspections of the field, such as the recent Harvard doctoral thesis of Deni Elliott, survey courses in journalism ethics with similar conclusions. "Literature pertaining to journalism ethics and journalism ethics instruction suggest a lack of clarity and agreement as to what constitutes appropriate ethics instruction" (Elliott, 1984).

University instruction labelled Journalism Ethics or Media Ethics covers a gamut from case studies of Robert Schmuhl at Notre Dame[2] to the combined social, aesthetic, and ethical criticism of media of William Rivers at Stanford University[3]. At some colleges, students are given a substantial choice among definitions of ethics. At Emerson College, Humanities 502 provides a general socio-philosophical overview while Mass Communication 344-5, Ethics of Reporting, taught by Eric Elbot, provides a more specific applied introduction for the working journalist.[4]

Another spectrum of courses includes constitutional/legal thinking, as did those of J. M. Kittross during his years at Temple University, while others seek to discover a more indigenous language and literature. Christians and Kim Rotzell at Illinois fit this category.[5] From one perspective such a variety of courses offer a rich range of individual insights and backgrounds. From another, the overall field lacks focus, consistency of meaning, and coordinated direction.

Counterbalancing Guidelines

Clearly, the existing imbalance between informal and formal media learning calls for vast expansion and enrichment in both curricula. Infants ought to hear from parents, teachers, and advertisers that a toy (or beer) commercial is fictional, not real, and that an announcer offers an invitation to purchase, not a command. As the child matures, so ought the quality and penetration of ethical and mass communication training. In this regard, preschool, elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate administrators ought to carefully consider their responsibility to students, parents, and society.

Governments, advertisers, and professional communicators are no less responsible for understanding and shepherding the informal curriculum. For decades they have sought to institutionalize codes and regulations that will install effective self-discipline mechanisms. Such codes and regulations, however, have in common with all legal frameworks a major challenge. Laws are no stronger than their consistent implementation by and representation of the ethical passions of people to whom they apply. While codes and regulations have come and gone, human nature seems to have remained constant. The increasing number and size of libel suits and critical attacks against media institutions sug-

gest codes and ideals may often be espoused but not enforced.

Qualitative Guidelines

More formal education, like more codes and (de)regulations, will not necessarily provide a counter-balancing check to a runaway information society. The greater needs are substantive. A deepening, sharpening, and exploring of more mature ethical possibilities is vital. For example, most students and many academics have little awareness of the twin menus provided by *space* and *time*.

Metaethics permits and, indeed, invites the student to transcend cultural entrapment and examine the ethics of previous individuals and civilizations. For a student to ask how a local editor might handle a conflict of interest may prove educational, but to ask how Thomas Hobbes or David Hume would resolve an ethical dilemma may lead to both a broader and deeper set of discoveries. Understanding the menu of *time* affords the scholar a panoply of systematically reasoned perspectives to contrast and select. Completing at least one ethics course within a liberal arts context is sensible for such broadened historical perspective.

In like manner, the exploration of *space* leads to fresh possibilities beyond the usual cultural imprisonment of most ethics curricula. To understand how Reagan and Gorbachev treat and are treated by the media in various countries leads to fertile comparative analysis and a fuller menu of options. Specific cultural differences need not involve different countries. The 1984 libel case of General Westmoreland vs. CBS could well be an example (Kaplan, 1984) of clashing indigenous cultures and sharply differing ethical mind sets. Broadening the mind beyond the ethics of regional parochialism and national chauvinism promotes not only richer curricular menus, but greater global understanding. It would be eye opening, for example, for a student who is convinced of the ubiquitous destructive distortion of *U.S.* media to discover the original charter and charge given to employees of the *British* Broadcasting Co. (Curran, 1979).

Thinkers may turn not only to the capstone thought of other centuries and cultures, but also to other professions. The literature surrounding medical and legal ethics is informative to the younger and smaller *media* ethics field. The insular perspective that media ethics are too unique to learn from neighboring professional disciplines was dispelled by James Carey (1979) in the aftermath of a conference at Harvard on Professional Ethics:

The thing that struck me after a grueling two and a half days was that the problems are the same in all professional programs. I had come to think that journalism was not part of the traditional professions, that law and medicine were not having quite the same anxiety that some of us were having. I felt that way until someone from medical school commented that they get plenty of students in their ethics courses because it is the only course in the curriculum with any intellectual content. Everything else was technique. After years of holding and developing techniques, the skills of medicine would have fallen through. So it is not only our problem in that sense for journalism. It's a problem of all professional education.

The greatest challenge, however is not in looking backward across centuries, nor outward across cultures, nor askance across professions, but rather in looking deeper, behind, under, or within one's own hidden ethical values. Christians' *Fifty Years of Scholarship in Media Ethics* (1977) shows how the textbook discussions of media ethics themselves reveal values not unrelated to their own social contexts. For the media ethicist of the 1920s, values such as duty, communal welfare, trust, decency, honesty of purpose, and service were primary. But from the 1930s until the 1960s media moral values associated virtue

more closely with objectivity, unbiased facts, relevance, thoroughness, and practicality. More recently, situationalism, expediency, and economics have figured more prominently in media morality discussions and in value-free ethical analysis. Christians (1981) lists three areas he feels are the most prominent underlying assumptions of the normative ethics of the 1980s: 1) man's enlightened rationality, 2) the unconditional nature of freedom, and 3) cultural and ethical relativism.

Pedagogical tools such as studying ethics in broader contexts (including a greater exposure to one's own) would seem to be valuable to the opening of the human mind. Studying specific cases, thinkers, and methods of logic in greater depth is more valuable for disciplining the human mind. Encouraging the student to find concrete professional applications for abstract ethical discoveries allows the thinker to move beyond mental contemplation toward responsible action.

Summarily, counterbalancing guidelines cannot become rigid ethical codes themselves. Rather, guidelines should stress a greater quantitative/qualitative growth in formal curricula. Such a curriculum cannot impose upon the student an inflexible monolithic ethic, but rather open and discipline the mind to and through the varieties of substantial ethical thinking. Finally, communication ethics is meaningless if it does not invite the student to consider his/her own responsibility as person, citizen, and professional communicator.

Broader and Deeper Conclusions

While the clarity and precision of contemporary ethics has eliminated much opinion, the relative simplicity of basic ethical precepts may have been lost. It should be remembered that before the craftsmanship of Aristotle, Plato's quest for "the Good" suggested a more universal purpose for ethics. Before Plato, Socrates stood midway between a traditional aristocracy and a new commercial class whose Sophist tutors advocated more utilitarian and situational ethics. The current dialectic between similar ethical systems—Republican values of traditional morality and the situational expediency of high tech deities—offer a parallel setting for reflection.

Socrates' answer was not to impose either of a pair of divergent ethical values on the other. His admonition to each was to "know thyself." A common fear of ethical training stems from the suspicion that a rigid moral system will be imposed under the guise of "ethics." Such ends were not the original purpose of Socrates.

The value of ethics is not to impose narrow values, but rather to expose broader and deeper possibilities than those already imposed by the informal curriculum. One such possibility is *thinking*. Heidegger (1967), for example, questions whether thinking still occurs in a world of disjointed electronic sounds and images. Another such possibility is *knowing*. Knowing cannot be discovered through programming, whether the informal commercial programming of the environment and subconscious or the formal educational programming of the consciousness. Knowing occurs within. Ultimately communication ethics cannot be poured into the student or society, although both may be uncorked. "Know thyself" is the teacher's corkscrew.

Following *thinking* and *knowing* is the possibility of *expressing*. When truth (knowing) is expressed, a finer quality of communication is possible. Finally, *acting* is a possibility. When acting is based on thinking and expression is based on knowing, then responsible communication occurs. Such a simple logic may well be the base for a specific ethic of communication.

Notes

1. See, for example, Gerbner, George (1983). Liberal Education for the Telecommunication Age. adapted transcript, keynote address to annual convention of the American Associations for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; Beckwith, Barbara (1984, January-February). He-Man, She-Woman. *Columbia Journalism Review*, pp. 46-47; Kellogg, M.A. (1983, April) Man Watches TV for a Living. *50 Plus*, pp. 14-18; Bittner, John (1983). *Mass Communication*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, pp. 473-479; Gerbner, George (1969, October) Testimony to National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, Washington, D.C.

2. For sample case study write Prof. Robert Schmuhl, Center for the Study of Man in Contemporary Society, U. of Notre Dame, 1122 Memorial Library, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556.

3. Prof. William Rivers of Stanford University's Department of Communication teaches Communication 131-231, for which the Syllabus might best be described as "enchanted poetic license."

4. Both Elbot and Glen Snowden (Humanities 502) may be written at Emerson College, 100 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02116. Snowden is at the Division of Humanities, Elbot at the Division of Mass Communication.

5. Kittross is at Emerson College and Christians is at College of Communication, U. of Illinois-Urbana, Illinois.

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